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ABSTRACT

This report examines the implementation of standards-based reform in Washington and whether the reform strategy has worked. The report is based on a survey of two statewide samples of elementary schools at which students had taken the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) fourth-grade test in 1997 and 1998. The first was a sample of 30 schools at which scores had improved significantly (a rate of 50% or better). The second was a group of 10 schools that served a similar population but which had experienced little, if any, improvement. The researchers interviewed each principal and collected written materials about the school's improvement strategy. Among the key conclusions is that effective changes in teaching methods and materials should be focused and schoolwide, not random and fragmented. Schools that were improving operated as teams, not loose associations. They were marked by professional development and were active in seeking help. Improving schools used their limited resources strategically and called on parents to help. Performance pressure was found to be helpful when it fosters determination and not fear. The study shows that schools can boost student achievement with concerted effort. Specific recommendations are made for policymakers, educators, parents, and community and business leaders. (SLD)

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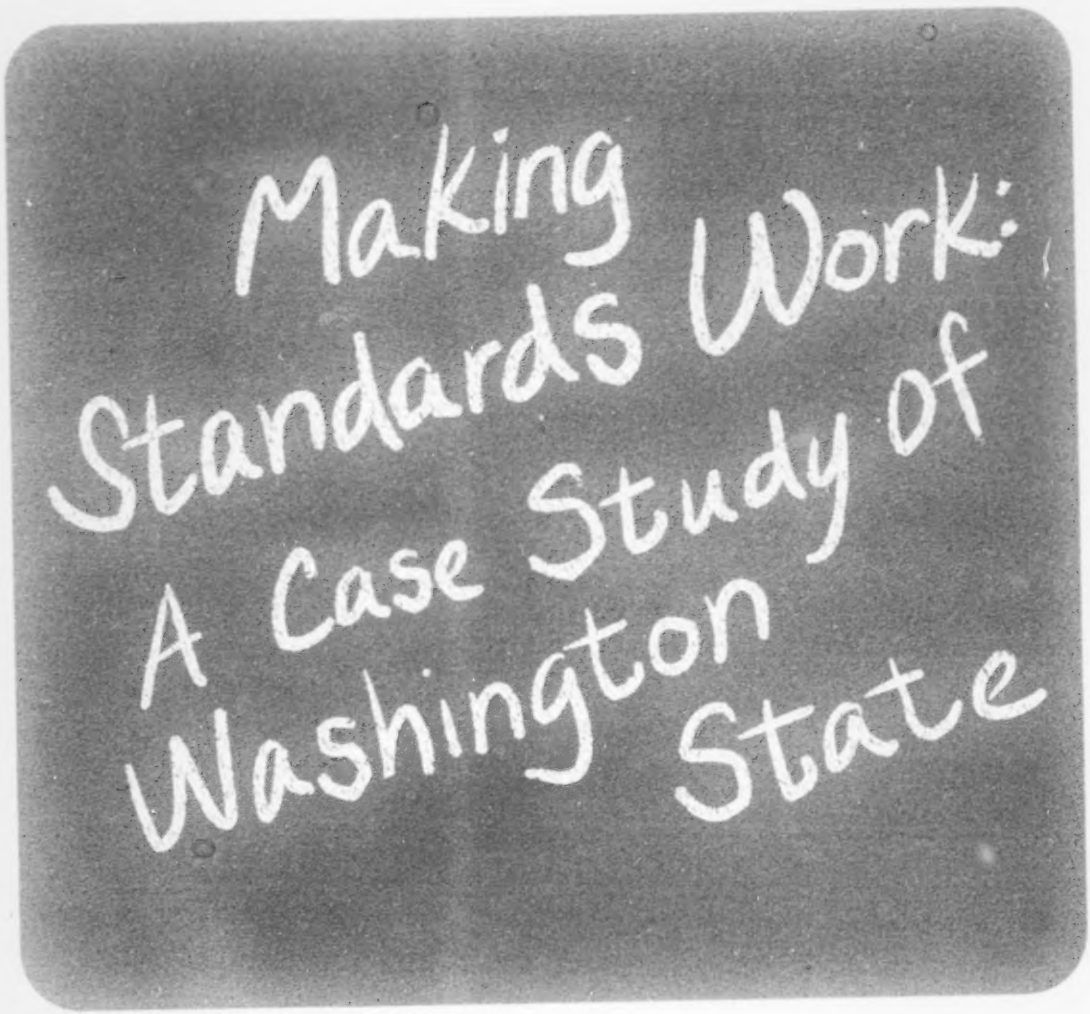

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by Robin J. Lake, Paul T. Hill, Lauren O'Toole, and Mary Beth Celio

JULY 1999

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Making Standards Work

A Case Study of Washington State

by
Robin J. Lake, Paul T. Hill,
Lauren O'Toole, and
Mary Beth Celio

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Foreword

We hear it all the time: schools cannot be held responsible for student achievement, due to the overwhelming effects of family income, home and neighborhood environment, and parents' education (or lack of it). In the face of this defeatism, states have forged ahead with standards-based reform, developing academic standards and tests that measure students' mastery of these standards, with the expectation that every student should be able to meet high standards. How has standards-based reform worked in practice? This report suggests that there is some reason for optimism.

In these pages, Paul Hill and Robin Lake, director and associate director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) at the University of Washington's Graduate School of Public Affairs, and two other analysts (Lauren O'Toole and Mary Beth Celio), explain their recent study of the effectiveness of standards-based reform in the state of Washington. The research team studied forty schools with similar demographics. Thirty of these demonstrated rapid growth on standards-based tests while ten showed little to no progress. They found that, regardless of outside variables such as family income, a school could improve student learning when its faculty worked as a team, implemented skills-targeted instruction, and was not shy about self-evaluation.

The study on which this report is based was commissioned and sponsored by Partnership for Learning, a business coalition that works to support Washington state's school improvement efforts. The results were originally published as *Making Standards Work: Active Voices, Focused Learning*, a publication of the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington's Graduate School of Public Affairs. The findings were so interesting that we asked to republish the report for a wider audience, with minor additions to make the results more useful to readers outside the state of Washington. We're grateful to the authors, the Center, and the Partnership for their ready cooperation.

The Center on Reinventing Public Education is well-known for pioneering work in developing and evaluating methods of governance that lead schools to be focused, effective and accountable. Under Paul Hill's superb leadership, the Center has produced some of the most powerful research on education that we have seen. Hill is also research professor at University of Washington and Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. He is a much-published scholar-analyst. Among his recent works are *Fixing Urban Schools* and "Getting It Right the Eighth Time: Reinventing the

Federal Role" (an essay on the history and problems of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, published in our volume *New Directions: Federal Education Policy in the Twenty-First Century*). Robin Lake, Paul's co-author here and the CRPE's associate director, is author of numerous outstanding articles on education reform as well.

The other authors are also accomplished. Lauren O'Toole is an education policy consultant who also works at the Seattle School District's African-American Academy. Mary Beth Celio is a demographer, education data analyst and Senior Partner at Northwest Decision Resources, a social science research firm. Readers wishing to contact any of the authors may write to The Center for Reinventing Public Education, Graduate School of Public Affairs, University of Washington, 327 Parrington Hall, Box 353060, Seattle, WA 98195 or e-mail crpe@u.washington.edu.

The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation is a private foundation that supports research, publications, and action projects in elementary/secondary education reform at the national level and in the Dayton area. Further information can be obtained from our web site (www.edexcellence.net) or by writing us at 1627 K Street, NW, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20006. (We can also be emailed through our web site.) This report is available in full on the Foundation's web site, and hard copies can be obtained by calling 1-888-TBF-7474 (single copies are free). The Foundation is not connected to or sponsored by Fordham University.

Chester E. Finn, Jr., President
Thomas B. Fordham Foundation
Washington, DC
July 1999

Executive Summary

In the 1990s, more than 30 states enacted standards-based reform strategies. The concept is straightforward: states set standards for what children should know and be able to do at particular grade-levels, align their curricula and teacher training to the standards, create statewide tests to measure student achievement, and, based on the results, mete out rewards, sanctions, and assistance. It is up to schools to develop the means of meeting these standards. This report takes a close look at the implementation of standards-based reform in one state, Washington, and asks whether the reform strategy worked.

The report is based on a survey of two statewide samples of elementary schools whose students had taken the Washington Assessments of Student Learning (WASL) fourth–grade test in 1997 and 1998. The first was a group of 30 schools whose scores had improved significantly (at a rate of 50% or greater) and the second was a group of 10 schools that serve a similar population, but whose scores improved little, if at all. The researchers interviewed each principal and collected written materials about the school's improvement strategy.

Key conclusions:

- Effective changes in teaching methods and materials are focused and school-wide, not random and fragmented.
- Improving schools operate as teams, not loose associations.
- Professional development is designed to remedy particular instructional weaknesses.
- Performance pressure helps when it fosters determination, not fear.
- Improving schools don't wait for help, they seek it out.
- Improving schools use limited resources strategically.
- Parents can help.

Policy implications:

Policymakers often minimize the importance of what can be done by individual schools. This study shows that schools that manage their resources strategically, work as a team and continually assess their progress toward specific goals can indeed boost student achievement. The report concludes with specific recommendations for state and district policymakers, principals, teachers, parents, and community and business leaders.

Introduction

In the 1990s, more than 30 states have committed themselves to standards-based reform. The idea is simple: set standards for what children should know and be able to do at particular grade-levels, align curriculum and teacher training to ensure that students are taught what they need to know, create statewide tests to measure pupil performance relative to the standards, and use the results to allocate assistance, rewards, and sanctions.

Though such reform starts at the state level, the real action takes place in the schools. In theory, the state sets standards and publicizes the results of student testing, but it does not tell schools how to teach or allocate time and effort. On the assumption that the people in a school are the ones who know individual children best, standards-based reform reduces regulation and gives individual schools greater control of dollars, time, and teaching methods. Knowing that they will be held accountable for results, school leaders and teachers should review their own weaknesses, reallocate time and money, seek help, and continuously improve instruction in light of changes in student performance.

Standards-based reform reduces regulation and gives individual schools greater control of dollars, time, and teaching methods.

No state has fulfilled all its promises to deregulate schools or increase school control of funds. But many have gone far enough to allow schools that want to take greater responsibility for student performance to do so.

Washington is one state that has progressed far enough to permit a first assessment of the results of standards-based reform. In 1993, the legislature enacted an omnibus statute with all the elements of standards-based reform. Washington's new state education system is still "under construction." However, its first elements are now in place. Children in fourth grade took the new statewide tests (the Washington Assessments of Student Learning, or WASL) in reading, writing, mathematics, and listening for the first time in spring 1997, and again in 1998. Other elements of the state reform, including a school performance accountability system, assistance for schools struggling to meet the standards, and new tests (for students in the 7th and 10th grades, covering history, social studies, and science), will all be introduced in 1999 and 2000.

The Study

In late 1998, we assessed the results of the Washington state reform. We did so with funding from the Partnership for Learning, a group founded by business leaders to support statewide reform. We hoped to learn how schools whose students do well on the early tests differ from schools whose students do less well, and then to identify ways that struggling schools can get the help they need.

The study was based on a survey of two statewide samples of elementary schools whose students had taken the 4th grade test in both 1997 and 1998. The first was a group of 30 schools whose scores had improved significantly from 1997 to 1998. The second was a group of 10 schools that serve demographically similar students and were located in the same parts of the state as the first group, but whose scores

had improved only slightly or not at all.[1] The majority of schools in each sample were low-income (as measured by the proportions of their students receiving free and reduced-price lunch) and all scored below the statewide average on the 1997 4th grade tests.

Rapidly-improving schools were those whose scores increased at more than twice the statewide average. Elementary school reading and math scores increased at an average rate of 10% between 1997 and 1998. In our rapidly-improving schools, scores increased at a rate of 50% or greater.

We completed interviews in 35 of the 40 schools (26 rapidly-improving schools and nine non-improving). We spent an average of 30 minutes on the telephone with each principal or principal's designee, and collected written material about the school's improvement strategy.

The interviews sought principals' ideas about why the students scored as they did on the state tests and, when appropriate, why scores had improved.[2] In addition, principals were asked about the following:

- New funding received beyond the normal school budget
- Recent changes in instructional methods
- Sources of help, advice, and teacher training
- Sources of pressure for improved test scores
- Changes in school-parent relationships
- Helpfulness of materials provided by the state and school district.

Finally, every principal was asked what advice he or she would give other schools that were struggling to improve student learning.

Findings

In general, whether a school improved depended on what the adults in the school did. In rapidly improving schools, principals and teachers assessed strengths and weaknesses, set a limited number of priorities, focused on improving instruction, and took the initiative to find the help the school needed. To make sure planned improvements truly happened, principals and teachers re-allocated funds, rearranged teacher work assignments and instructional schedules, and made sure all staff members coordinated their classroom work. Improving schools also continually—and candidly—assessed their own progress.

Improving schools continually—and candidly—assessed their own progress.

Schools that did not improve were passive and fragmented. Teachers often tried to improve instruction, but each went her own way. School-wide collaboration proved difficult and principals could not—or perhaps did not try to—overcome long-established patterns of teacher isolation. School leaders often took the attitude that someone else—the district or the state—was responsible to show them how to improve instruction. Some complained that the materials provided by the state were too voluminous and varied to be useful.

Our findings make it clear that schools—and what the people who work in them do—can make a difference in what students learn. This conclusion should be no surprise. However, many critics of education reform claim that action at the school level either does not matter or cannot change enough to increase students' results. Some, noting that student achievement is correlated with family income and the presence of two educated parents, claim that the only way to raise scores for disadvantaged children is to change society. Others, noting

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that many teachers are not sure how to help their students meet higher standards, claim that schools can improve only after the state has re-trained all teachers or provided massive amounts of new money for smaller classes and new books, instructional materials, and technology.

Scores on state tests correlate highly with family income and other indicators of socio-economic status, but that does not tell the whole story. Children in some low-income schools did relatively well on the state tests, and children in some higher-income schools did relatively poorly. Family income is an advantage for some schools and a problem for others, but it in itself does not cause student learning. Further, some schools are clearly able to improve the effectiveness of the resources they have. Better family services and more investment in instructional materials and demanding teacher training and evaluation can also help. But schools can make a difference now.

> Our findings make it clear that schools can make a difference in what students learn.

More specifically, we found that:

- **Effective Changes In Teaching Methods and Materials Are Focused And School-Wide, Not Random And Fragmented.** In the two years since statewide testing began, most schools have made changes in what and how they teach. However, the vast majority of schools whose scores increased made a single change that affected the whole school and unified the efforts of all teachers. Schools whose scores did not increase added on new programs or materials that affected some teachers and not others and did not lead to a more unified school-wide approach.

- **Improving schools focused their efforts on developing children's skills in a few core subjects or skill areas.** To make time for these efforts, many schools abandoned activities that were fun and familiar but had no well-defined instructional objectives. Schools whose scores did not increase were generally less focused on skills and more reluctant to eliminate activities that teachers enjoyed but were not clearly productive.

- **Improving Schools Operate as Teams, Not Random Associations.** Improving schools did more than plan; they implemented, every day and in every classroom, and they made sure that teachers at every grade level were coordinating their efforts. Principals and teachers recognized that even the best-conceived strategies fail unless every teacher executes them even when the classroom door is closed.

- **Professional Development Is School Development.** Improving schools had no more funding for teacher professional development than schools whose scores did not increase. However, the former group of schools took much more initiative to find and use professional development programs designed to remedy their particular instructional weaknesses and prioritized the use of their professional development time to support the school's improvement plan.

- **Performance Pressure Is Positive When It Leads To Determination, Not Fear.** The vast majority of principals reported that the state standards and tests had created pressures for better and more effective teaching. None were complacent, even those whose scores had recently improved. Many principals of improving schools were proud of their gains but worried that some might not be sustained if future 4th grade classes were less capable than those tested in 1998.

- **Improving Schools Don't Wait for Help, They Seek It Out.** Principals of schools whose scores did not increase often

criticized the help and materials provided by their school districts, complaining that help was too general, unfocused, and hard to use. Principals of improving schools were much more likely to say "the help is out there; it is up to us to select and use what we need."

- **Improving Schools Use Limited Resources Strategically.** Improving schools focused all available funds on instruction by setting priorities and directing resources toward them. Schools whose scores increased were no more likely to have received extra funding than schools whose scores did not increase.

- **Parents Can Help.** Improving schools were more likely than other schools to reach out to parents, explaining the state tests and the need for improved performance and asking for help at home, e.g. reading to children and checking homework.

The following sections illustrate these points, using principals' own statements. A final section suggests what these findings imply for teachers and principals, school district leaders, and the state.

Focused, School-Wide Changes

All but one improving school had made a major change in its instructional program in the past few years. These changes were more than just a new textbook or new module for a few days' instruction in one grade. They represented a significant philosophical shift in how teaching and learning take place at the school. In our interviews, schools that had improved explained why they had chosen a particular curriculum or approach and how it fit with their overall strategic plan. Improving schools were also more likely to have chosen a new curricular model themselves rather than to have it chosen for them by the district.

Improving schools analyzed the weak points in their test scores and focused classroom time on areas they needed to improve. As principals told us, this often meant spending less time in areas that teachers felt were valuable or fun, but improving schools considered it critical to emphasize a few key areas to build a strong new foundation for learning.

Quite frankly, it [the WASL] is not always popular because you can't teach a lot of your pet units that you used to enjoy—you know, doing the luau because it was fun . . . it's a fun unit. We are much, much more directed.

Improving schools analyzed the weak points in their test scores and focused classroom time on areas they needed to improve.

We had definite conversations as a school on what reading's all about and how we want to teach it. If you were to look at a lesson plan from 96–97 and a lesson plan now, you would see a dramatic increase in the time spent on reading. We spend an incredible amount of our morning in the language arts area. And we have no assemblies or interruptions during that block of time. We put our educational assistants in for an hour block in each classroom during the morning for the small group work. We have a strong belief that there needs to be whole group reading instruction and small group reading instruction and then individualized and we look at our lesson plans for that. We believe that we should be reading to kids every single day, kids should be reading by themselves, and we should be reading with kids every single day. So we built some philosophical criteria for how we want to approach reading and how that should reflect in our lesson plans.

Our teachers need to focus from a large menu on what is considered "meat and potatoes."

We moved to block scheduling so that all teachers teach reading at the same time and instructional assistants are available for more support during core instruction time because we were not using our instructional assistants effectively. We also clustered students to provide more adult support to more challenging groups.

Several schools discussed the challenge of how to maximize instructional time on reading, writing, and mathematics without neglecting other important subjects. The principals we interviewed found creative ways to provide a well-rounded learning experience at the school. For instance, some helped teachers find ways to integrate or overlap their instruction so that they could cover a lot of different subject areas while still teaching the target skills.

You know, I don't care what the district tells you you're supposed to be teaching. What are you really teaching? You know, second grade teachers are teaching penguins. And that's not written down in the district curriculum somewhere. I asked them, "So you take two weeks to teach penguins; how does that jibe with what the district says you're supposed to be doing for second grade?" Those teachers eventually found ways to continue to do penguins. They may tweak them a little bit and either add something to them, or delete something out of it so that it fits within what's supposed to happen in second grade to prepare kids for this fourth grade benchmark.

Improving schools stressed the importance of taking a thorough look at what every instructor at the school is teaching and how it relates to the state and district standards. They looked for ways they could improve instruction throughout the school, starting with kindergarten and first grade. Over and over we heard, "This is not just a fourth grade test." Some schools unified teachers' efforts via group discussions. Other schools developed very specific grade-level exit standards for students and put them up on the wall so that teachers, students and parents all understood what was expected.

We sat down with every teacher at every grade level and we decided which things we were going to teach at every grade level. We created a checklist coordinated exactly to the Essential Learnings and the teachers check off when they accomplish the essential learning component.

When I took over in the school, it didn't make any sense to me that teachers didn't communicate clearly with each other what was expected in first grade, second grade, third and fourth grade. What is the written curriculum? What is it that we say we're teaching? What are we really teaching?

New methods and programs were seen as ways to flesh out a school improvement strategy, not as magic bullets that would solve all problems by themselves.

Principals from improving schools mentioned using a number of name-brand instructional programs, such as Six Traits of Writing, Accelerated Reader, and Reading Recovery. But these programs were almost never implemented in isolation. They were brought in after the school had identified its needs and aligned all resources toward its goals. In other words, new methods and programs were seen as ways to flesh out a school improvement strategy, not as magic bullets that would solve all problems by themselves.

Many schools identified a shift in instructional focus toward writing and communications. Nearly half focused on reading as a

foundation for other subjects. The following illustrate the kinds of instructional strategies that improving schools pursued:

> *Our kids are writing in everything now [i.e. in math, science, and social studies as well as reading classes].*

> *We use rubrics to get kids used to evaluation. I say to them, "I would have given you a two on that. You need to do better than that." Empower them with sense of [their] own [self] evaluation.*

> *Have kids talk about how they got answers. Get kids to think out loud. How did you come to that conclusion? Out-loud processing and thinking are critical.*

> *We really focused on writing in math, more technical and informative writing.*

> *Our Educational Service District helped us do an analysis and, as a result, we've focused greater attention on certain skills. For example, we've done well with fiction, not non-fiction, so now we're putting more emphasis on analyzing non-fiction.*

The schools that experienced little or no increase in their test scores fell into two categories. The majority recognized the need for a more focused, strategic approach to instruction, but were unable to put one into effect, usually because of the principal's inability to overcome staff resistance. Here is a typical statement from a principal of one of the comparison group schools:

> *We're trying to teach new skills, but some [teachers] more than others have shifted their instruction.*

A smaller group of the comparison schools seemed satisfied with their existing instructional strategies. When asked whether student test scores had caused the staff to work on any particular skills, principals either answered in the negative or said that they were just trying a few things out. A few mentioned work on writing skills.

> *Our shift in instruction is a lot of cooperative learning, recognition of different learning styles and multiple intelligences.*

Schools as Teams

Principals in almost all the improving schools said their improvement strategies were implemented school-wide—it was not left up to individual teachers to decide how to improve student performance. Principals emphasized the importance of making sure that all teachers understand the strategy and are excited about it. As they explained, making the school into a "team" requires more than teacher motivation. It is critical for students, parents, and the community to understand and support the school's improvement strategy.

> *I knew where we were going and I had the vision. People began to commit to it. We infused [new] people into building and that got excitement going.*

> *During year one, we had no idea of what to expect or how to prepare kids. And after we got the scores back the first year, we knew our kids were better than this and refocused and created a plan (tutoring and small group) to prepare kids; our whole building took it on, not just 3rd or 4th grade; it was a school-wide effort.*

> *You really need to be focused. It needs to be a total building effort. I think it helps to know that everybody is helping everybody. When I start talking WASL or promotion policy, I talk to my entire staff, and then we break out into grade levels.*

I work very hard to build a culture of accountability among students, to take responsibility to do their best. This binds a school together.

Figure 1 illustrates the difference between improving schools and comparison schools. Among schools that showed little or no improvement, answers were almost evenly split between those that said their strategy was implemented school-wide and those that said it was left up to individual teachers. Some principals were frustrated at their inability to create a unified school-wide strategy. As one explained,

I wish I could say school-wide—[but] some older teachers are having trouble changing. For the time being, I am letting them go at their own pace. If they continue being resistant, I will have to be more heavy-handed and go to a whole-school program. But our staff's not interested in that.

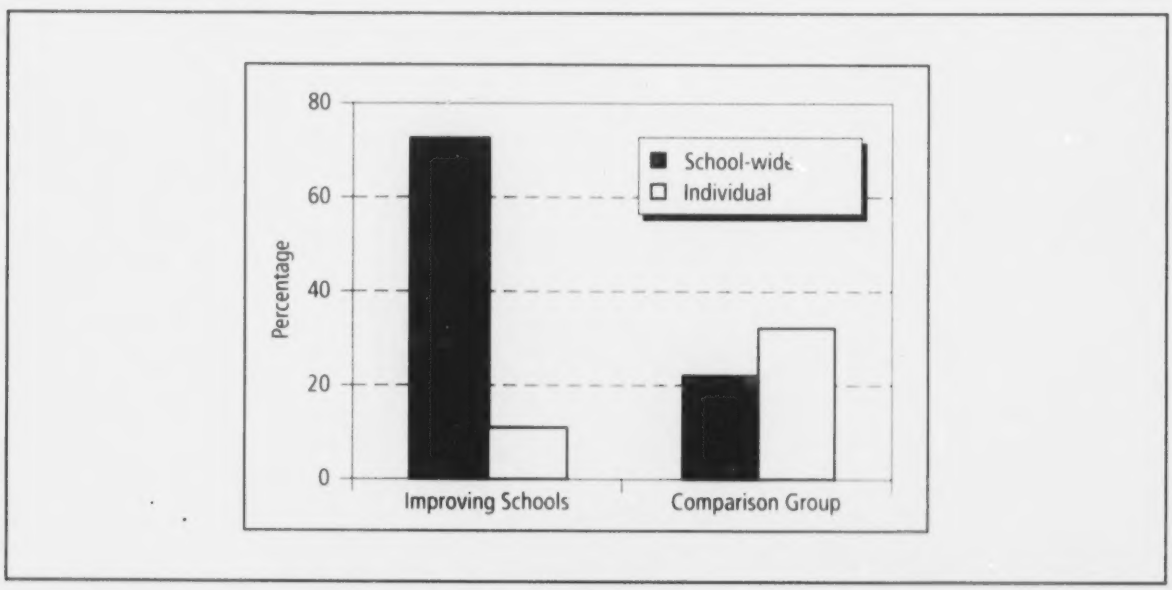
Professional Development is School Development

In addition to making changes in instruction, 61% of the improving schools indicated some recent change in their staff development programs and how their staff development resources were allocated, as opposed to 44% of the comparison group. The improving schools stressed that dedicating school time to serious teacher collaboration was an essential piece of their strategies. In contrast, few of the comparison schools changed staff development to support a specific improvement strategy—their professional development programs often consisted of miscellaneous workshops and technology training.

Principals identified key attributes of professional development in improving schools:

- Staff development time was used strategically.
- Effort focused on a few instructional goals that meshed with "Essential Learnings" (EALRs).

Figure 1: Percentage of schools implementing school-wide strategies vs. individual teachers' initiatives



- Many used staff development resources to allow teachers to plan and integrate methods and materials across grade levels.

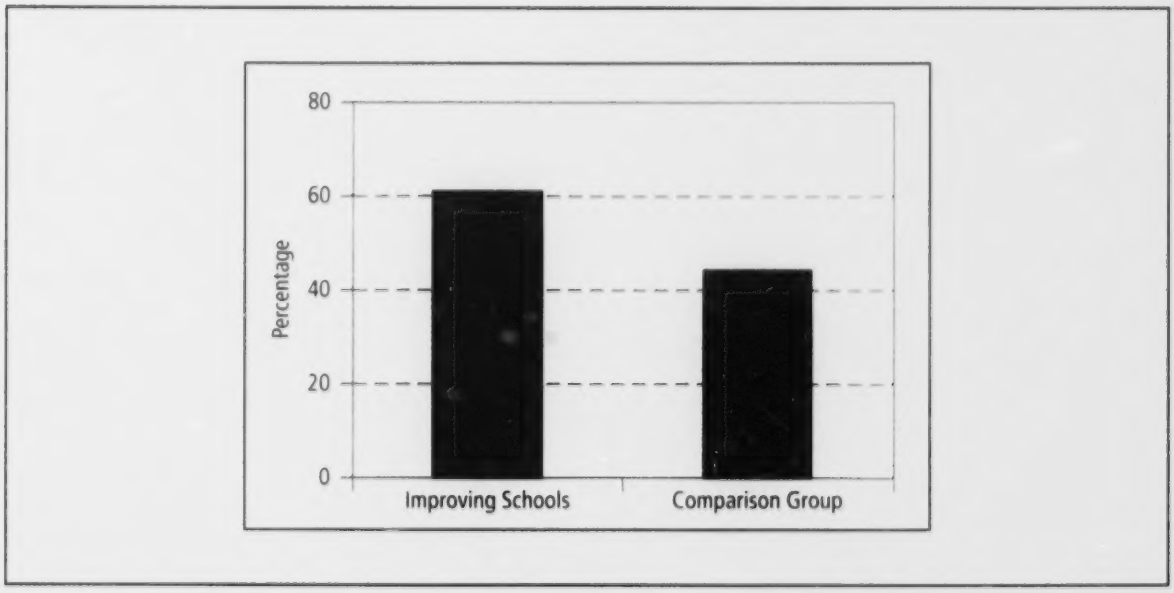
- Staff development funds were seen as critical but finite resources for implementing the school's strategy. They were not seen as bottomless pots of money that individual teachers could use as they pleased.

> *Our staff decides the best use of staff development funds. We decided that if teachers were going to get paid for training, they'd have to come back and teach others what they learned. So we didn't go out and get any canned presentations. What we did was take a group of teachers and look at other schools, programs that worked. We also invested in training people to be specialists. When we needed a reading specialist, we spent money on training one.*
>
> *We used state SLIG [Student Learning Improvement Grant] money, Title One, and baseline dollars to provide staff development. We combined that with the "time and responsibility days" that the district gives us and waiver days. So there's a paradigm shift that happens. When SLIG money first came out, teachers thought they were getting the money. We changed things so that we'd pay for them to take coursework. Money didn't go to pay them any longer, but to pay for the services we needed.*

As figure 2 shows, fewer comparison schools had made major changes in their staff development program. Contrast these statements from principals in our comparison group schools:

> *If staff member wants to go to a conference, they ask the site council.*
>
> *Hopefully, it relates to the Essential Learnings.*

Figure 2: Percentage of schools that made a major shift in their staff development program in the last few years



We use our SLIG money for technology and computer training.

Positive Response to Performance Pressure

Almost all schools reported feeling pressure from their districts and the state. A few schools were targeted—either formally or informally—by their districts as low-performing schools. Those schools felt immediate pressure to "improve or else." Three of the improving schools had principals who were brought in specifically to turn the school around.

When our superintendent comes to a school like [ours] with such a diverse population, parents cheer when he says, "We are raising the bar and making kids more accountable."

Four to five years ago, the community came to the district and said, "We've got to improve." Now every school must have a plan to improve test scores. We scored very low on the first test and were called the flat tire of the district. Having been a football coach, I know that the best thing you could ever do to create a championship team was to put them down and say disparaging things about them. Particularly if they had any pride about them. Well, this school has a huge amount of pride and dignity and they just said they weren't going to take that any more. And I think that added fuel to the fire; created a common enemy.

The motivation to improve test scores was often internal, coming either from the principal's leadership or the teaching staff's desire to improve.

But it was clear that the motivation to improve test scores was often internal, coming either from the principal's leadership or the teaching staff's desire to improve. As one principal said:

They (parents) felt pressure from me. I said to them, this isn't an education I'd want for my child, I can't imagine it's one you want for your child. It was a lot of warehousing of kids. The philosophy when I came there was, we need to make kids feel good about themselves before we teach them, so there wasn't a lot of teaching before third grade. I said to my teachers, 'We're going to teach kids and they will feel good about themselves because they're learning.' And the people who stayed bought into that. When we had the chance to move people in and out, we brought in a strong first and second grade team. I knew the curriculum would challenge the kids and challenge the . . . teaching staff. We paired newer teachers with older teachers, then fifth grade teachers were impressed and motivated.

Whatever the motivation, many principals reported that improving their test scores was among their schools' highest priorities. Three-quarters of the improving schools, and two-thirds of the other schools in our study, said that raising WASL scores was of high or the highest importance.

I believe absolutely in raising the bar and raising the standards. And so far as the WASL can assess how we move towards these new and better and increased standards, then it is the highest priority for my building.

Active Search for Help

Principals had very different ideas about what kinds of help are useful. Some schools thought state "toolkits" were extremely useful. Others thought they were a waste of time. Some schools relied heavily on their

districts for assistance. This support often took the form of staff development help or specialists who helped schools revamp their curriculum to align with state standards. Many schools also relied on their districts to help them analyze their test results and identify areas of deficiency. Others sought the help of whole-school design organizations, such as Success for All, or hired outside consultants to assist the school with its strategic plan.

The most common theme of comments from improving schools was, " Don't wait for help. Go out and find it."

> *When we chose our curriculum, we made vendors come out and do a song and dance for our curriculum panel to prove to us that they would meet the EALRs [state standards]. And then our work is done.*

Principals knew how difficult it was going to be to raise scores year after year. Principals in improving schools were often cautious, acknowledging that an unusually bright 4th grade class could have raised scores in 1998. Many also suggested that teacher and student familiarity with the test format in the second year was also a factor. Familiarizing students, teachers and others with the format of the test, and teaching test-taking strategies, probably also led to score improvements. (These factors, however, were common to all schools).

Schools that raised student scores focused all available funds on instruction.

Principals in improving schools had additional theories about why their scores had increased. Most attributed their schools' gains to coordinated, school-wide efforts to improve students' performance on the WASL via focused instruction in particular areas. They suggested that the intuitively obvious strategy—analyzing test data, identifying the school's weak spots, coordinating who would teach what and when, and using school time and money to support those activities—made the difference.

> *We set upon a task of establishing an academic emergency and then doing something about it. It's like an alcoholic getting well. We're not doing well and we don't know all the reasons for it, but we're gonna start investigating and bringing in new stuff and asking people for help. The message was not that teachers were doing something wrong, just that they were spending their time in the wrong places.*

Many schools attributed their score increases to a particular instructional technique or curriculum. Reading Recovery, Accelerated Reader, and Six Traits of Writing were commonly mentioned. But it was clear that successful schools did not see these programs as sufficient in themselves. They advised that schools must assess their deficiencies and seek out materials and techniques that fit their unique needs.

Strategic Use of Resources

Schools that raised student scores focused all available funds on instruction. In some cases, this meant extending the school day or lowering class size in selected classes. In others, this meant hiring additional instructional assistants to provide direct tutoring for students who needed extra help. Many improving schools controlled their own budgets in ways that allowed them to set their own funding priorities.

Improving schools were no more likely than other schools to receive an influx of new funding. The difference was in how schools used funds, whether existing or new. The improving schools had definite strategies for improving teaching and learning and sought grants to support those strategies. This was true whether a school sought to improve in-class

instruction or provide more time for one-on-one tutoring.

> *We blended our funding to hire tutors so we could put more than one adult in each classroom. We used our Title One funds to create an inclusive model and a solid block of time for small group instruction. Ninety percent of our Title One funding is now used [to increase] instructional hours.*

> *We used a $50,000 literacy grant from Costco to fund a full-time teacher and create a "literacy school" within the school. This is an eight-week intensive program for 3rd/4th graders who are identified as reading one-and-a-half to two years below grade level. The kids spend all day, every day, working on reading.*

> *We received funds from two donors for a homework center and Saturday Academy. We use other grant funds for social services, rent vouchers, a family support worker, parent assistance specialist, and contracts for counseling. I made sure that all of these funds were used so that our teachers could focus on teaching.*

> *We put all of our title [state and federal program] monies into people. I used some of the money for accelerated reader incentives and for buying disks and books. But for the most part, I try and buy tutors and hourly staff for all the grade levels, all the way up, so that they are being prepared for the testing that's going on throughout the building.*

Help from Parents and the Community

Principals in improving schools were more likely to say that they had asked parents to do something to help improve scores. The type of help they received from parents differed from school to school. The most common response was, "We educated parents about what we were trying to do." Most of the schools we interviewed reported that past levels of parent involvement were not high and seldom went beyond conferences and parent-student nights.

While an uninvolved parent population might have stopped other schools, improving schools saw it as a challenge. These schools set out to find creative ways to draw parents into collaboration, such as combining a family fun night with a short discussion of how parents could help the school improve. Some schools kept their requests to parents simple, e.g., "Read to your child for 20 minutes a day." Other strategies were more elaborate.

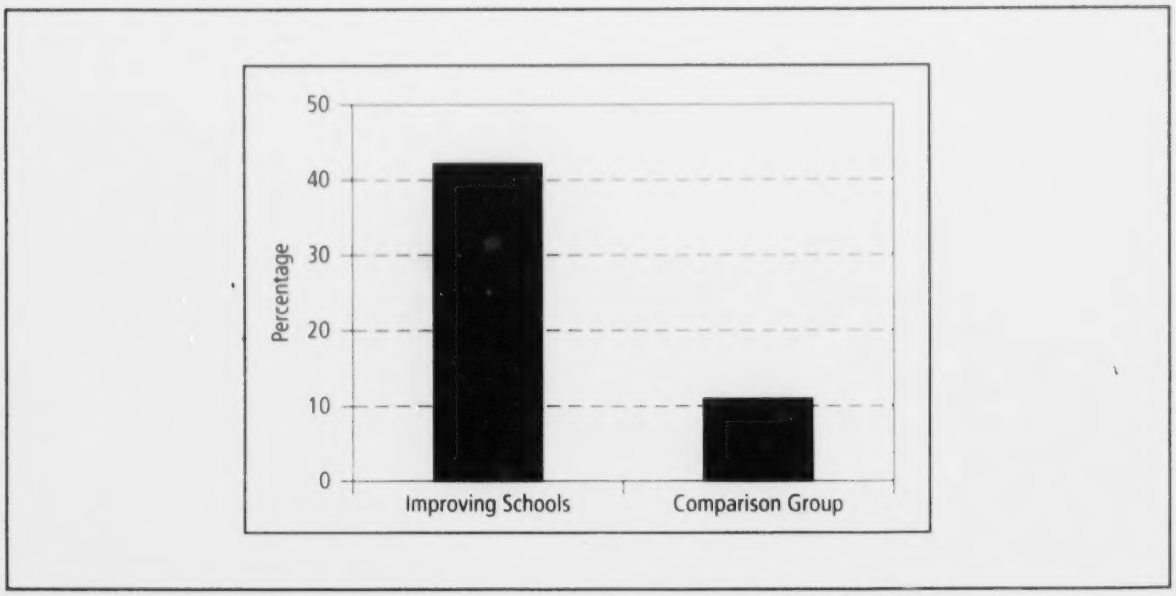
> *We asked (3rd and 4th grade) parents to take the sample test so they could see what we were trying to do, what was expected of the kids. We also talked with parents about how we were changing our instruction so that when they were working on homework with their children, they would know to ask them to explain their answers, etc.*

As figure 3 illustrates, schools in our comparison group were less aggressive in informing and leading parents. One principal's response was typical:

> *We held an open house and asked parents to get more involved in their kids' education.*

In schools where poverty or other problems limited parent involvement, some principals turned to the broader community. Many of the improving schools made special efforts to ask community businesses and non-profit organizations to support their instructional goals rather than just donate equipment. One principal actually refused help if it was not directly tied to instruction. As she put it, "We had to take that out because they were more interested in doing social things and we

Figure 3: Percentage of schools that asked parents to do something different



couldn't do that on the kids' education time."

In contrast, comparison schools often took whatever help was offered. One principal told us that the school received "lots of help" from volunteers, but that volunteer time did not focus on any particular area, just "whatever work the individual child is either in need of, or whatever the volunteer's particular talent is."

Implications

There is reason for optimism. The vast majority of schools, including those in the slower-improving group, expect their scores to improve next year and are optimistic about the instructional changes they are pursuing.

This study identifies certain attitudes and practices common in improving schools. Eagerness to improve, acceptance of responsibility, willingness to take initiative, determination to unify the efforts of teachers who are accustomed to working in isolation, and openness to new roles for parents, are all important. But if these factors are necessary, they are probably not sufficient in themselves.

Knowing that attitude and initiative are vital is one thing; increasing the number of schools with those attributes is another. From this small study, we cannot estimate the number of schools statewide that have approached the state standards and tests in the ways that our "improving" schools did. Future studies should estimate the number of schools likely to take the initiative on their own.

We also cannot say that every school in the state that took the initiative in ways described above succeeded in raising its test scores; some might have taken the initiative but made choices that did not work for their students. Moreover, none of the "improving" schools had yet succeeded in bringing all their

students up to state standards. There is more to be done.

School accountability for performance—including rewards for improving schools, assistance for schools struggling to improve, and sanctions including closure and redevelopment for schools whose staffs cannot unite on an effective instructional strategy—should increase the number of schools that own up to their problems and aggressively seek solutions. The Washington legislature enacted a standards-based accountability scheme in 1999.

But the state and the school districts need to think ahead about what can be done with schools that do not improve. Clearly, the willingness of school staff to take responsibility for student performance, and to unite on an improvement strategy, is essential. Based on what we have learned about non-improving schools, some may be so complacent or divided that no amount of leadership or performance pressure can motivate the necessary changes. The state must not allow deference to school staff habits or job rights to prevent bold action on behalf of children in failing schools.

The willingness of school staff to take responsibility for student performance, and to unite on an improvement strategy, is essential.

The study results have clear implications for key actors in Washington state and beyond:

For state policy makers:

- Make sure the state accountability plan puts real performance pressure on all schools and leads to actions that will change leadership and staffing in schools that lack the ability— or are too internally divided—to manage their own improvement process.

- Document in detail what improving schools have done, what instructional changes have led to greater student learning, and what assistance providers (both public and private) have been most helpful to schools. Then find effective ways to distribute that information to schools.

For districts:

- Help schools share information about what has worked for their students. Assume responsibility to identify schools that cannot coalesce on an improvement strategy, and help or change them.

- Make sure that schools that want to pursue aggressive improvement strategies are not hamstrung by rules and external controls on funds, especially for professional development.

For principals:

- Identify school performance deficiencies.

- Lead the teaching staff and parents to define an improvement strategy and implement it in every classroom.

- Don't wait to be told what to do. Seek and manage outside help.

- Ensure that all resources, including volunteer time, staff development programs, and all of the school's discretionary funds contribute to the school improvement plan.

For teachers:

- Participate in the development of school-wide instructional improvement strategies.

- Take responsibility both for adapting teaching to the new strategies, and for coordinating with, listening to, and making demands of other teachers.

For parents:

- Accept that school change and improvement will also require new commitments from families.
- Familiarize yourself with the new state standards and tests and find out how you can help your child and other students meet the standards.
- Expect to work more closely with children, making sure homework is done and attendance and effort are high.

For community and business leaders:

- Help schools make investments in new instructional strategies.
- Ask schools how new funding will support improvements in student learning.
- Focus funding to support individual schools' core strategies for teaching and learning, not feel-good peripherals.
- Sponsor continuing evaluations of progress similar to this one.

Conclusion

These findings echo the results of years of research on what works in education—what happens inside schools matters. Effort matters. Taking responsibility matters. Honest self-assessment, and earnest collaboration to reverse patterns of low performance, matter.[3]

Results like these are especially important because policy-talk in education so often minimizes the importance of individual schools and concerted effort within them. In Washington State and elsewhere, heads of teacher and administrator organizations point to the high correlation between family income and school performance and claim either that high standards are unrealistic or that school improvement requires massive infusions of new money, teacher re-training, and new instructional materials. Studies like this one show that school improvement depends more than anything else on human effort.

> School improvement depends more than anything else on human effort.

Standards, new money, new materials, or intense teacher training cannot make a difference by themselves. All such initiatives come together within the school, and they can only benefit children if teachers and administrators take the kinds of initiative described above. State and local leaders committed to standards-based reform must make sure it happens at the school level. Simple studies like this one can show what is (and isn't) happening, and help focus attention on schools where adults are not taking the necessary initiative.

In many ways our findings are common sense actions that any school could take. But they also show that simple actions, not complex theories or silver-bullet curricula, can make a real difference in a school's ability to meet new state standards.

We hope this report will serve as a useful tool for school staffs, and those who work with them, to better understand how all schools can make significant improvement in student achievement.

Appendix

Interview Protocol

How long have you been at this school?

How long have you been principal?

In the past two years have there been any major changes in the student body?
- Major growth or decline in student population?
- Added or dropped grade levels?
- Draw students from a different neighborhood than before?
- Have a new program (e.g. gifted, arts, disabled) that draws from a different group of students than before?

In the past two years have there been any major changes in the teaching staff?
- Growth or decline in numbers of teachers?
- Many new teachers?
- Addition of new teachers with specific skills or training?

In the past few years has the school received any extra funds beyond its normal budget? In what amount? From what sources?

In the past few years has the school:
- Changed its instructional methods? How? For what grade levels and subjects?
- Joined or hired a school assistance organization, (e.g. Coalition of Essential Schools, Success for All, or a New American Schools Design Team?)
- Changed its staff development program?
- Received new funding for professional development?
- Been designated by the school district as an exemplary or troubled school?
- Received special help from a foundation or business?
- Brought in a new tutoring program?
- Received special help from parents or the PTA?

In your school, did the average Washington Assessment of Student Learning scores of 4th graders rise or fall between 1997 and 1998?

Why do you think the students' scores changed as they did?

Did the teachers in your school focus on teaching any particular skills as a result of the 1997 4th grade WASL? What skills did they focus on? What strategies did they use?

Was the strategy one that was employed school-wide or left up to individual teachers to implement?

Did you ask parents to do anything different to help their children or the school? What did you ask?

What was the impetus for these changes? Did your teachers or you feel pressure from parents? From the district? From the state? Others?

Among all the things you are trying to accomplish in your school, what priority would you assign to raising student WASL scores?
- Highest Priority
- High Priority
- One among many priorities
- Low priority
- Not a priority at all

How great a contribution did materials provided by the state (e.g. booklets, toolkits, classroom-based assessments) make to your effort to raise student WASL scores?
- Major
- Significant
- Minor
- No Contribution

How great a contribution did materials provided by your local school district make to your effort to raise student WASL scores?
- Major
- Significant
- Minor
- No Contribution

Do you think your school's scores on the 1999 WASL will rise or fall? Why?

What advice would you have for other schools about how to improve their students' WASL scores?

Notes

[1] Because we wanted to learn as much as possible about the strategies schools pursue to improve student learning, we believed looking at schools that served disadvantaged students yet made large gains in both reading and mathematics would yield the most useful information. Rapidly-improving schools were those that made the greatest percentage gains, not those with the highest absolute scores. We studied an equal number of rapidly-improving schools from urban, rural, and suburban areas.

[2] See Appendix for the survey questionnaire.

[3] See, for example, Teddlie, Charles, and Stringfield, Sam, *Schools Make a Difference*, New York, Teachers College press, 1993; Newmann, Fred M., et. al., *Authentic Achievement: Restructuring Schools For Intellectual Quality*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1996; Coleman, James S. and Thomas Hoffer, *Public And Private High Schools: The Impact Of Communities*, New York, Basic Books, 1987; Bryk, Anthony S., Valerie E. Lee, et. al, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1993; and Hill, Paul T., Gail E. Foster, and Tamar Gendler, *High Schools With Character*, Santa Monica, RAND, 1990.

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